

Freedom and slavery in Martial 11.39

William Fitzgerald

*Cunarum fueras motor, Charideme, mearum
et pueri custos adsiduusque comes.
iam mihi nigrescunt tonsa sudaria barba
et queritur labris puncta puella meis;
sed tibi non crevi: te noster vilicus horret, 5
te dispensator, te domus ipsa pavet.
ludere nec nobis nec tu permittis amare;
nil mihi vis et vis cuncta licere tibi.
corripis, observas, quereris, suspiria ducis,
et vix a ferulis temperat ira tua. 10
si Tyrios sumpsit cultus unxve capillos,
exclamas 'numquam fecerat ista pater':
et numeras nostros adstricta fronte trientes,
tamquam de cella sit cadus ille tua.
desine; non possum libertum ferre Catonem. 15
esse virum iam me dicet amica tibi.*

You were the rocker of my cradle, Charidemus, and my constant companion and protector when I was a boy. Now the towel blackens with my shaven beard, and my girlfriend complains she's pricked by my lips. But I haven't grown up in your eyes; our bailiff is terrified of you and so is the store-keeper – the very house itself fears you. You don't allow me to have some fun or fall in love; you want me to have no freedom and you to have it all. You reproach me, you spy on me, you complain about me, you sigh wearily and your anger scarcely stops short of beating me. If I've put on my Tyrian outfit or oiled my hair, you exclaim 'Your father never did that'; and you tot up the number of the drinks I've had with a frown, as though the barrel came from your own cellar. Stop it! I can't stand a freedman Cato. My girlfriend will tell you that I'm now a man.

(Translated by Nigel Kay)

'I'm not a child anymore, so don't treat me like one!' Timeless sentiments, familiar to any parent or teenager? Maybe, but there's quite a lot that makes this version particular to its time and place. For a start, it's not addressed to a parent, but to an ex-slave. The punch-line of this epigram is not really the protestation of the final line, but the words 'I can't stand a freedman Cato' (*non possum libertum ferre Catonem*), which condense Martial's long complaint to his old tutor into a witty put-down. Charidemus should stop behaving like a Cato and remember that he's only a freed slave. Cato the Younger, hero of the dying days of the Republic, fought with Pompey in the Civil War and committed suicide rather than accept pardon from Julius Caesar. He was also famous for his old-fashioned moral standards, and that appears to be the point of Martial's comparison: Charidemus, who appeals to the example of Martial's father, disapproves of all modern luxuries. But we'll see that both Cato the Republican martyr and Cato the moralizing spoilsport are relevant to the oxymoron '*libertum Catonem*'.

(School-)master and slave

Charidemus is Martial's *paedagogus*, a Greek word meaning

'child-leader'. Young Roman boys had slave *paedagogi* who escorted them to school or to the baths or theatre, but who might also teach their young masters and generally look after their moral welfare. A *paedagogus*, then, was an awkward combination of attendant servant and figure of authority, and this is one of the many paradoxes of Roman slavery, in which people whose status was in some ways less than human could hold positions of responsibility and trust. Though slavery was an enormously important part of ancient Roman life, Martial is the only Roman poet who consistently writes about slaves and slavery, and we can learn a lot about the institution from his epigrams. One of the main distinctions between slaves and free in Roman thought was that slaves could be beaten, while free men could not. But, when the free person in question was a minor and the slave a *paedagogus*, the situation could be reversed. Martial's Charidemus can't get used to the fact that his young master has grown up, and is still itching to use the cane on his former charge; he wants to take every liberty himself and allow Martial none (*nil mihi vis et vis cuncta licere tibi*, 8). Characteristically, Martial plays with names here. Charidemus has an appropriately Greek name (many *paedagogi* would have been Greek), but his name is not so appropriate in meaning since he is anything but the 'people-pleaser' (*chari-demus*) that his name suggests.

Slaves who worked in close personal contact with their masters had a reasonable chance of being freed, and even of becoming Roman citizens (which was less likely for slaves who worked in the fields, for instance). A *paedagogus* might be freed after his charge had grown up, and this is probably the case with Charidemus. If so, it only increases the irony of the situation: Charidemus is a freedman because Martial is now an adult; now that he is free, Charidemus should remember that he no longer has the authority over Martial that he wielded as a slave!

Man-child

But how does Martial show that he's no longer a boy? By proving he's a *man*. And what is a man? Someone who has sex with women. Martial *pricks* his girlfriend with his beard, so she can testify that he's a man – the puns aren't Martial's, of course, but they get his point across in a way he might have done himself. Romans thought of sex as (among other things) an exercise of power, in which the penetration of one person by another involved dominance and subordination. Just as slaves were the beings who were beaten, so women were the beings who were penetrated, which reflected the proper relation of power between male and female. In the final line, Martial uses his position as a grown man (as witnessed by a woman) to remind the ex-slave Charidemus of his status as a freeborn man. At its very broadest level, this epigram raises a paradox of power-relations between the slave and the free, only to dispel it by confirming the expected relation between male and female.

Poetry and history

But did Martial really have a *paedagogus* called Charidemus who still treated him as a boy? Book 11 was published in 96

when Martial would no longer have been a young man (the earliest book of his that survives was published in 80). So unless he is recycling something he wrote a long time ago we cannot think of this as autobiography. In other poems in Book 11, Martial presents himself as married, so what are we to make of the girlfriend here? Clearly Martial makes no attempt to present a consistent self-portrait, and he adopts different poses as it suits him. The 'I' of the epigrams is not necessarily the historical Martial. But though the epigram is inconsistent with other poems in the book as far as what Martial tells us of his private life is concerned, it is consistent with Martial's self-presentation as an epigrammatist. From the preface of the first book of epigrams, Cato the Younger stands for old-fashioned morality and everything that is opposed to the genre of the epigram, with its X-rated gossip, racy anecdotes, and obscene language. In the preface to Book 1 Martial tells people like Cato to stay away from his books if they disapprove of obscenity. So the 'I' in this poem may not be the real flesh and blood Martial but he could well be Martial the writer of epigrams. This is another occasion when the epigrammatist tells Cato (and all his type) to stay away.

This epigram also needs to be put in the context of Book 11 as a whole. Book 11 was published shortly after the death of Domitian, the last emperor of the Flavian dynasty, and at the beginning of the short reign of Nerva. Domitian had been a 'bad' emperor, but that had not prevented Martial from writing many flattering epigrams for him, celebrating his reign as a Golden Age. Martial had done well as a result. Now he had to curry favour with the new regime. In other poems in Book 11 he welcomes the death of his former patron Domitian and the accession of Nerva as the beginning of liberty, a claim that Nerva had made on his coins. The epigram we're looking at is another poem celebrating symbolically the freedom brought by the new regime. Martial has grown up, and so has the whole of Rome, which can now cast off the restrictions of Domitian, who had had himself declared 'perpetual censor', and live freely.

But the punch-line of the epigram (*libertum Catonem*) uses the theme of freedom in another way as well, as we can see if we emphasize Cato's reputation as martyr of the Republic. Cato had died as a champion of freedom. The Republican cause had lost, and Rome had passed into the control of the dictator Julius Caesar, and from him to the emperors. Nerva's new regime may be bringing freedom, but not in the sense that Cato had meant it, for this was the beginning of Rome's third dynasty of emperors. Instead of a free Cato (*liberum Catonem*) we have a freed(man) Cato (*libertum Catonem*), a wonderfully banal version of the great Roman hero of political liberty. Do you think Martial is making fun of Cato, or of his own age, which cannot come any closer to the real thing than this?

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